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SUBJECT: Senegal: Massive pilgrimage to Touba underlines strength of the new Mouride Caliph

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On February 14 the Mouride brotherhood celebrated its annual pilgrimage known as the Magal or "elevation" in Wolof. The Magal commemorates the exile of the founder of the brotherhood, Ahmadou Bamba MBacke, to Gabon by French Colonial authorities in 1895. This year's Magal saw massive attendance and coincides with the completion of the first year of the rule of the new Caliph-General, Serigne Bara Mbacke. End Summary.

The Celebration of Resilience

¶2. (SBU) After seven years of exile and house arrest in Gabon, the founder of Mouridism returned to Senegal in 1902 to continue to lay down the groundwork for his vision of a non-violent Islamic movement to counter the influence of French colonialism. Bamba's brand of Islam promoted a strong work ethic, self-reliance, and self-esteem in a society that had lost its identity following the expansion of colonization. His exile is interpreted by Mourides as a spiritual retreat where Bamba worshipped God who in return rewarded him with the city of Touba.

A Period of Transition

¶3. (SBU) This Magal coincides with Caliph Bara Mbacke's first year as leader of the Mourides. He is the first grandson to inherit the caliphate and, judging from the massive attendance of the celebration, the transition seems to be proceeding well. Atou Diagne, leader of the powerful Mouride NGO, Hizbut Tarquiyyah, told Embassy that this Magal is, "a new beginning, because when Serigne Bara became Caliph there was real tension within Mouridism. There was a fear that some players outside the community would use this tension to fuel divisions in order to break their influence within Senegal. Instead, what they got is a new vision and a Caliph who has really come into his own. Many acolytes came from all over the country to revivify their faith and see for themselves the large renovation projects they had heard so much about."

The Caliph's Message

¶4. (SBU) In his message, the Caliph called upon wealthy Senegalese within the country and abroad to invest in agriculture and industry to stem the tide of illegal migration among the country's youth. He also called upon the state to support religious education in the formal system and to promote good citizenship. He invited the leaders of the international community to promote peace and dialogue, which he said are the only ways to guarantee security and prosperity for mankind.

If you Don't Build Touba, God Will Send Angels To Do It

¶5. (SBU) The new Caliph has initiated projects that are expected to cost some fourteen billion CFA (28 million dollars). These include the enlargement of the grand Mosque of Touba, the renovation of the electricity grid, and roadwork aimed at connecting the city's major squares (known as Pintah) to the city's ring road to increase traffic flow. In the past year alone, the Caliph has spent 1.3 billion CFA (2.5 million dollars) of his personal funds on the Mosque. With

that money he has, for example, made a payment to purchase marble that will pave 25,000 square meters around the Mosque. He has also announced that he will soon lay the foundation of an Islamic University that will be home to 30,000 students from Senegal and abroad. This project is the physical embodiment of one of the tenets of Mouridism that a disciple should "worship God enlightened by science and anchored on good behavior." Recalling the words of Bamba that "if the Mourides do not build the Mosque of Touba, God would send angels to do it," the Caliph said the same applies today for the city of Touba, as the state has promised much, but delivered very little.

Effort at Transparency

¶6. (SBU) At a recent ceremony to launch public works in Touba, a spokesperson of the Caliph gave a detailed financial accounting of the projects being conducted in Touba. This is unprecedented and shows that Bara is aware that, unlike his predecessors who were venerated, some will hold him accountable and it is in his interest to be transparent to maintain his authority. It was revealed that his predecessor Serigne Saliou spent some 6 billion CFA (12 million dollars) on a variety of infrastructure projects and that the Mouride community's bank account known as the Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Account had a balance of 16.97 billion CFA (approximately 34 million dollars). He also said that President Wade had given a contribution of 2 billion CFA (4 million dollars) to the late Caliph; but that he later took it back to pay the Chinese company Henan Chine that build the NGabu Road, a new five-mile highway that makes access to Touba easier. Wade's reason was that the GOS had failed to budget the cost of the road.

A Political and Diplomatic Center

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¶7. (SBU) A week before the Magal, political leaders of all stripes flocked to Touba to re-affirm their spiritual and political allegiance to the Caliph. Leading the pack was President Wade who spent the night of February 9 in Touba, met twice with the Caliph, and visited ongoing infrastructure projects. Wade's most significant act was that he came with his son Karim to officially introduce him to the Caliph. This is the clearest step yet in building Karim into a potential successor. Wade asked for support for Karim, whom he dubbed, "an honest and hard-working leader."

Comment

¶8. (SBU) In contrast to the government, the Mourides continue to show an economic dynamism that seems to bely the financial crisis that is affecting the country at large. The new Caliph is committed to modernizing the city of Touba and boosting higher education, areas that his predecessors had largely neglected. This Magal has also served to further shore up the Caliph's authority over the Brotherhood. Attendance was at an all-time high and the city of Touba itself is undergoing many changes that are being welcomed by the local populace. This bodes well for the future of the Mourides and, by extension, represents one source of stability in Senegal. Bernicat